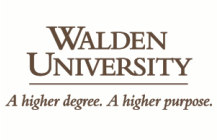

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Long-Term Retention Among Child Welfare Workers in Michigan: A Phenomenological Study

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Abstract

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Andrea Vajdic-Pena

MSW, Andrews University, 2005

BSW & BA Spanish Studies, Andrews University, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

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Abstract

High turnover of child welfare workers is a problem to the children and families that receive services and the child welfare organizations that lose their staff. For children and their families, turnover of their assigned worker may interrupt their ability to achieve their permanency goals. Child welfare organizations encounter high costs for hiring staff due to the turnover and the staff that remain suffer with higher caseloads and not being able to provide the quality of services that they should be able to offer. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. The conceptual framework consisted of 2 theories: organizational climate and organizational culture theory. Two focus groups, consisting of 3 participants from an urban community and 5 participants from a rural community, were used. A snowball sampling method was used to obtain the sample. A content analysis was conducted to discover major and minor themes. This study revealed that 5 factors contribute toward retention: a) caseload size; b) educational background and training; c) recruitment, screening, and selection; d) supervisory support; and e) peer support were supported by all 8 participants. In addition, a new factor of self-care emerged as a result of this study. While all the child welfare workers experienced all the factors that could have resulted in their turnover, due to implementation of self-care techniques they ended up remaining from 3 years to 13 years. Exploring self-care as an answer toward retention is worth exploring and can contribute toward social change in the field of child welfare.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to, most importantly, God, then my family and my children. This journey has been a challenging one, with many challenges and successes. I have seen His hand at work as I went through my journey to completion. Without Him, and His leading, I would not be where I am today. To my parents Milan and Lily Vajdic, you have provided me with love, encouraging words, and unwavering support even to the point of sacrificing yourselves in order for me to finish my doctoral program. There are not enough words to express the love and gratitude that I have for you. To my grandparents Felix and Dragica Mauko, you have always believed in me and provided support when I needed it the most. And Grandpa, while you were not able to see me complete my doctoral journey, I know that you would be beaming with pride that I earned my doctorate degree. To my husband Jose M. Pena, you helped me to persevere against all the obstacles that life was throwing my way during this journey and I have grown as a result. And finally, to my daughters Angelica and Liliana, I want you to know that you are the reasons why I started this doctoral journey. I love you girls from the bottom of my heart and I want you to know that you can achieve anything that your heart desires, as long as you have God on your side, and I will be there for you to support you through your journeys.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation, by far, has been one of the most challenging experiences I have encountered in my lifetime. I give my deepest gratitude to those who have provided support and encouragement during this journey. First, I would like to acknowledge my committee members. Thank you so much, Dr. Pamela Denning, for accepting the responsibility of being my chair member. Dr. Yvonne Chase, I am thankful that you also wanted to be a part of my journey. Both Dr. Denning and Dr. Chase devoted their time and effort to provide me valuable insight in the field of child welfare as well as their support during this journey and provided a foundation to my success. Next, I would like to thank Dr. Robert Ortega, who took time out of his very busy day to spend a few hours with me to help discover my passion about child welfare retention. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Ward III, who provided continually reminded me about the importance of self-care so that I could achieve my goals. Next, I want to thank Dr. Gregory Hickman, who always took the time to answer my questions and provided continual support during my journey. To my closest friends and coworkers Jill, Adrienne, Tabitha, and Cindy, you girls have been there for me through my dissertation journey and helped me to manage work, school, and family while keeping me grounded and I am eternally thankful and grateful. And finally, to my dearest friends Tracy and Frances, we began this doctoral journey together. Throughout this journey, we have been there for each other through hard work, tears, frustration, and our successes. Thank you so much for your love, support, and encouragement. I would not have finished this journey without you both by my side.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Within the field of child welfare, there has been an increased awareness of the high turnover rates of child welfare workers and how it impacts their clients as well as the child welfare organizations where they work (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Turnover rates of child welfare workers range from 23–60% annually within public and private child welfare agencies (Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). While there is a large range when providing statistics, an annual turnover rate of 25% or higher becomes a problem for child welfare organizations. These statistics demonstrate that it is difficult to retain child welfare workers; however, others may persevere and remain with the same employer in their field.

In the first chapter of this study, I provide background into the issue of turnover and retention and address the gap in literature. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of child welfare workers in a Michigan public child welfare organization who have remained with their employer for a minimum of 3 years. I used organizational culture and climate theory for the conceptual framework, and I used snowball sampling to recruit the participants. The study included three participants from an urban community and five participants from a rural community, where the participants are employed and live in these communities. Two focus groups formed the sample that was used to learn about the experiences of eight child welfare workers. The delimitations and limitations to this research study will also be in this chapter. Finally, I will discuss the significance of the study to the body of child welfare literature and its implications toward social change.

Background

Dickinson and Painter (2009) reported that more research is needed to understand the problem of high turnover. Child welfare organizations operate in two different sectors: public and private. In order to (a) provide improved outcomes for children and their families, and (b) address budget cuts, many states turned to privatization of child welfare organizations (Levy, Porter, & Lieberman, 2012). In the state of Michigan, about 47% of foster care case management services are through private child welfare organizations (Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Within private child welfare agencies, researchers are beginning to discover that the turnover rate is approximately double the rate than in public child welfare organizations (Levy et al., 2012; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Thoma (2003) found that the turnover rates of child welfare workers range from 25–85% annually. In private child welfare organizations, the turnover rates were doubled in comparison to those employed in the public organizations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003). The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2006) found turnover rates of child welfare workers to range between 6–27%. The Child Welfare League of America (2008) found that the turnover rate across the United States was 22%. A few years later, turnover statistics of child welfare workers ranged from 23–60% annually within public and private child welfare agencies (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). While there is a large range within the statistics, when the annual turnover rate is 25% or higher, then it becomes a problem for child welfare organizations (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Child welfare administrators note the more that child welfare workers leave,

mandated services are unable to be provided for child victims or their families (Aguiniga, Madden, Faulkner, & Salehin, 2013; Chernesky & Isreal, 2009).

While an older body of research has a focus on the high turnover rates of child welfare workers, a gap exists in current literature that addresses child welfare worker retention. Chenot, Benton, and Kim (2009) discovered that if child welfare workers remain with their employer for 3 years, then they are more likely to stay. Burns (2011) found that if child welfare workers are passionate about working with child victims of maltreatment and their families, then they are more likely to retain current employment. Another factor that may cause child welfare workers to remain on the job is due to receiving strong supervisory support (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009). Finally, if child welfare workers felt that they were respected by their administrators then they were more likely to remain with their employer (Augsberger, Schudrich, McGowan & Auerbach, 2012).

Problem Statement

High caseworker turnover poses a problem to both the children and their families who receive services and the child welfare organizations that lose their staff. Families do not have the support needed to reach their permanency goals as child welfare workers leave the organization and are assigned a new caseworker (Flower, McDonald & Sumski, 2005; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Organizations become burdened with expensive replacement costs and high caseloads for their staff (Barbee & Antle, 2011).

To study this problem, researchers have taken a predominantly quantitative approach to address the numbers of child welfare workers leaving and find factors that

lead to turnover and retention. While this information is important to begin the discussion of understanding what makes child welfare workers leave, the problem is that more qualitative research is needed to learn about the experiences of child welfare workers and what makes them stay in the field. Although previous research illuminates important findings regarding the turnover and retention of child welfare workers, I have found a lack of research regarding the factors influencing retention of child welfare workers for 3 years or more.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. The goal was to gain a description of their shared experiences from a phenomenological approach because they are the ones actively working in the field of child welfare. The documented themes keeping them employed with their present employer is the result.

Research Question

The research question postulated in this study was "What are the child welfare workers' experiences that influence them to stay with their employer for 3 years or more?"

Conceptual Framework

This study was supported by two theories: organizational climate theory and organizational culture theory. These two theories are used to understand how child welfare retention affects the child welfare organization in which they are employed.

Fleishman (1953), who is one of the first researchers to discuss organizational climate theory, defined organizational climate theory as how employers provide an environment where their employees have a meaningful experience so that they will be satisfied and remain with them. Based on personal experience in a work environment, the employee will develop a value system about how he or she views his or her employer (James et al., 2008). Organizational climate theory provides a framework to understand how child welfare employees become impacted psychologically by their work environment (Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006).

While organizational climate theory has an explanation about an individual's experience in the workplace, it does not encompass the entire experience of working within an organization. Organizational culture theory is an additional component to consider because the culture impacts the climate within the organization (Williams & Glisson, 2014). While organizational climate and culture link together, organizational culture provides a more detailed understanding of the organization's environment (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). From within an organization, a set of values, norms, and behaviors are in place for the employees to follow (Glisson et al., 2006). While employees are expected to internalize and embrace the work culture, they may just abide by them as part of remaining employed. However, their individual beliefs may be different and can pose a conflict. Organizational culture theory provides an explanation of how employees behave and conduct their assigned tasks.

Nature of the Study

For this qualitative research study, a phenomenological approach was useful in understanding the experiences of child welfare workers who remain with their same employer for 3 years or more. Phenomenological research involves having participants describe their experiences and how they perceived them (Patton, 2002). By learning about the experienced phenomenon, it helps to provide an explanation about how people view the world around them and how they developed their worldview. In other words, the experiences that the individuals encounter come to a level of consciousness in order to understand a common experience (Van Manen, 1990). A phenomenological approach was useful in gaining insight into a shared experience of child welfare workers remaining with their employer (Moustakas, 1994). In addition to learning about participants' experiences, a phenomenological study provides detailed descriptions regarding their overall experience (Moustakas, 1994). Purposeful snowball sampling was the process to identify eight Michigan child welfare workers who work for public welfare organizations, five who are employed in a rural community and three who are employed in an urban community. Each of these eight participants experienced the phenomena of having a minimum of 3 years of experience with their employer. The original sample target was 12 participants with six from an urban community and six from a rural community. There were 15 individuals who agreed to participate; however, due to unforeseen circumstances, the final total was eight participants.

This research study involved two focus group interviews with the child welfare workers who have been in their present role and positions for a minimum of 3 years in a

public child welfare organization. One focus group was with five child welfare workers in a rural community and the second focus group was with three child welfare workers from an urban community. Prior to commencing the focus group, the participants signed a consent form. During the focus group interviews, I used a recording device, the Smartpen, to record the interview. While the interview took place, I used handwritten notes to document their responses with the Smartpen. Respondent validation, or member checking, was useful to ensure their experiences were accurately represented; participants reviewed the transcripts of the focus group to assure their accurate perspective (see Maxwell, 2013). I analyzed the data by using QSR NVivo (QSR International, 2012). A content analysis, using QSR NVivo software, was the process to discover these major and minor themes (QSR International, 2012). The data entered onto the QSR NVivo software, journals, and the thumb drive to store the information were all placed in a locked home safe. This safe is only be accessible to me and will be stored in the safe for 5 years.

Definitions

To understand why the issue of high turnover of child welfare workers is a problem, there are a few terms that require definition.

Intention to leave: Child welfare workers expressing that they will plan to leave their place of employment in a definitive time frame. The reasons to leave outweigh the reasons to remain with their employer (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Shier et al., 2012).

Long-term retention: Remaining with the same employer for a minimum of 3 years (Chenot et al., 2009).

Turnover: Child welfare workers who are fully trained by completion of their probationary status (i.e., between 1 and 2 years depending on the employer) and are unable to complete their assigned tasks and end up leaving their current employer (Webb & Carpenter, 2012).

Assumptions

A few assumptions need to be addressed. They included the following:

1. Participants have been working for the same employer for at least 3 years and provided their perspectives in the focus group interviews about their years of experience with their current employer.
2. The participants were able to articulate their experiences during the focus group interviews.
3. The participants involved in this study do not have any intentions of leaving their current employer.

Scope and Delimitations

Scope

This study is on Michigan child welfare workers in the public welfare organizations who have remained with their employer for a minimum of 3 years. For the scope of the study, two focus groups were the sample. One group had participants from a rural community and the others were from an urban community. As such, the evolving themes discovered in these focus groups could possibly reflect the experiences of other

public Midwestern child welfare staff. Their job expectations, being similar, may reflect comparability to these other staff and their experiences.

Delimitations

For this study, child welfare workers from private agencies were not be part of the sample. The different dynamics within private child welfare organization may provide an explanation to high turnover, but not considered within the public sector. One example is that public organizations use private child welfare organizations to provide fiscal savings for the state (Levy et al., 2012). Other factors unique to private organizations that may contribute to high turnover rates include lack of resources for clients, lack of resources for the private child welfare workers to conduct their tasks, and lack of staff to provide support (Strand & Dore, 2009). As a result, one of the possible reasons for turnover for private child welfare workers is the increased pressure for work performance so that the private organizations can demonstrate the cost savings (Levy et al., 2012).

Limitations

In phenomenological research, while it is beneficial to obtain rich and detailed information, limitations exist. For this study, these were some limitations:

1. Snowball sampling could have impacted the transferability of this study because participant experiences may be specific to who they work with and where they are employed. One of the ways to address this limitation was to ask the participants if they are aware of others going through similar experiences in other locations within the state.

2. Data collection method of in-person focus groups could have increased participant bias as they share similar experiences and expand off what other participants share. During the focus group, I made sure to ask follow-up questions to see if the experiences provided are similar to everyone else in the group or if this was a unique experience.
3. The possibility of personal disclosure may have made participants uncomfortable in discussing their experiences in front of their peers. Participants were informed that what was shared in the group was confidential and they were not obligated to answer any questions that they feel uncomfortable with.
4. The issues identified by the participants could be specific to their local office. I followed up and asked if their experience is specific to their office or if they felt it was a statewide issue.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (Maxwell, 2013). Due to previous experience as a child welfare worker who left the job shortly after completion of the probationary status, I am aware that my personal experience is not that of the participants involved in the study, because they remained with their employer beyond 3-year periods. While personal experience in the field may be a bias, incorporating the experiential knowledge in the research can be beneficial and should not be ignored (Maxwell, 2013; Strauss, 1987). Complete separation from personal experience in the research study would not allow for insights, hypotheses, and validity checks to occur (Maxwell, 2013). To address researcher bias, respondent validation was useful to ensure

that personal experience did not affect my understanding of what the participants shared during the focus groups. In addition, during the data collection and analysis process, I noted any personal bias through journaling. However, researcher bias cannot be eliminated from this research study and required ongoing monitoring.

Significance

While there is significant research in the turnover of child welfare workers, other researchers have concluded there is limited research that contributes to their retention (Johnco, Salloum, Olson, & Edwards, 2014). The findings of this study will contribute to the limited research identifying the themes that contribute to the long-term retention of child welfare workers. High turnover rates of child welfare workers affect the child victims of maltreatment and their families. When child welfare workers leave, a change in workers can cause families to be without the support to reach their permanency goals (Flower et al., 2005). As a result of child welfare worker turnover, difficulties occur in an inability to establish trust and have stable relationships between the assigned worker and the families (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). When workers leave, additional responsibilities go to those who are left behind to handle these cases until newly trained child welfare workers take on their full caseload (Barbee & Antle, 2011). By retaining child welfare employees, these organizations will be able to provide an improved quality of staff with expertise in working with children who are victims of maltreatment and their families (Chernesky & Israel, 2009).

At the organizational level, turnover of child welfare workers poses additional problems. When employees leave, the child welfare administrators have the

responsibility to recruit new staff and provide them the training necessary to do their job, which impacts agency costs (Barbee & Antle, 2011). While new staff go through their training, the workers who remain have the burden of carrying another worker's caseload until the new child welfare workers have enough training to maintain a caseload.

Retaining child welfare workers provides a savings for child welfare administrators of about a third of a million dollars annually for each state (Barbee & Antle, 2011). With fewer burdens to continuously replace staff due to turnover, and the projected savings for the organization, it would allow for child welfare administrators to focus on the long-term retention of their staff. The findings of this study provide insight to child welfare administrators and may assist them to develop policies which provide a work environment that will encourage child welfare workers to stay in the field longer to provide services for children and families with the increased skills and knowledge they have gained. Additionally, these findings also benefit policy makers in state government in the creation and implementation of child welfare policies and regulations for child welfare agencies and organizations. Most importantly, these findings will contribute toward social change by benefiting the children and the families who receive the mandated services from the child welfare organizations as more child welfare workers are gaining more experience and remaining with their employer.

This study provides insight from experienced child welfare workers about their experiences working in a public child welfare organization. While there are child welfare workers who work in private child welfare organizations, this study focused on the dynamics and experiences of those who were working in the public sector. The themes

found from their experiences will be beneficial for child welfare administrators as they look to find ways to retain their staff. This will result in being most beneficial for the child victims of maltreatment and their families as they are going through the mandated services, as there will be more consistency from the child welfare workers who are experienced in the field.

Summary

High turnover rates of child welfare workers are an increasing problem for child victims of maltreatment and their families as well as the child welfare organizations that provide those services (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Using Michigan child welfare workers as participants in this study, I aimed to determine the reasons that some public child welfare workers remain with their employer for a minimum of 3 years. The conceptual foundations framing this study were the organizational climate and culture theories. By using a lens from an organizational perspective, I provide additional insight for child welfare administrators to create an environment where their child welfare staff will remain on a long-term basis. This change will allow for a positive effect on the child victims and their families due to the stability and increased experience of their child welfare staff as well as an internal benefit for their child welfare organization.

In the next chapter, I will provide an examination of child welfare literature in regard to turnover and retention. Additionally, I review the problem and purpose with the conceptual framework that shapes this study. In Chapter 3, I review the research method and design. Chapter 4 will include a discussion of the data collection and an analysis of

the data. And finally, Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of the findings along with recommendations and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

High caseworker turnover poses a problem to both the families that receive services and the child welfare organizations that lose their staff. Families do not have the support needed to reach their permanency goals as child welfare workers leave the organization and are assigned a new caseworker (Flower et al., 2005; U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Organizations become burdened with expensive replacement costs and high caseloads for their staff (Barbee & Antle, 2011).

Researchers have taken a predominantly quantitative approach to address the numbers of child welfare workers leaving and to find factors that lead to turnover and retention. While this information increases understanding of what makes child welfare workers leave, more qualitative research is needed to learn about the experiences of child welfare workers and what makes them stay in the field. Although previous research illuminates important findings regarding the turnover and retention of child welfare workers, I found a lack of research regarding the factors influencing retention of child welfare workers for 3 years or more.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. My goal was to gain a description of their shared experiences from a phenomenological approach because they are actively working in the field of child welfare. The results of my research were themes keeping child welfare workers employed with their present employer.

In this chapter, I will discuss the strategies used to search the child welfare worker turnover and retention literature. Organizational climate and culture theories provided the conceptual framework to understand how the organization plays an important role toward the turnover or retention of child welfare workers. I used qualitative research to learn more from the perspective of the child welfare workers who remained with their employer. As I explored the problem of high turnover rates of child welfare workers, two major factors arose: personal and professional life. These two factors are the basis to provide insight on child welfare worker turnover. Since turnover of child welfare workers is a problem, retention literature is necessary to find themes that can contribute to having child welfare workers remain with their employer. The five major themes explored: (a) caseload size; (b) educational background and training; (c) recruitment, screening, and selection; (d) supervisory support; and (e) peer support.

Literature Review Strategy

The strategy to complete the literature review was to use a variety of databases as well as combined terms. Academic and peer-reviewed literature associated with the study needed various databases, which included Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, PsycTESTS, SAGE Premier, SAGE Research Methods, and SocINDEX. When searching through the databases, I selected full text options and peer-reviewed journals to obtain sources that were fully accessible and principal sources. For the databases, I used the following key terms using "and" as the Boolean/Phrase: *child welfare, child maltreatment, child welfare worker, child welfare administration, child welfare administrators, supervision, retention, long-term*

retention, high turnover rates, qualitative, phenomenological, organizational culture theory, organizational climate theory, child welfare policy, public child welfare organization, and *private child welfare organization.*

Conceptual Foundations

Organizational climate theory and culture theory provided a framework for how child welfare retention affects child welfare organizations. Fleishman (1953) defined organizational climate theory as viewing how employers provide an environment where employees have a meaningful experience so that they will be satisfied and remain with them. Based on their personal experiences in their work environment, employees develop a value system about how they view their employer (James et al., 2008). Organizational climate theory provides a framework to understand how child welfare employees become psychologically shaped by their work environment (Glisson et al., 2006).

Organizational culture theory adds to organizational climate theory, which is an explanation of an individual's experience in the workplace but does not encompass the entire experience of working in an organization; organization culture is also important because the culture impacts the climate within the organization (Williams & Glisson, 2014). While organizational climate and culture link together, organizational culture provides a more detailed understanding of the organization's environment (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013). Each organization has a set of values, norms, and behaviors in place for the employees to follow (Glisson et al., 2006). While an expectation is that the employees will embrace the work culture, they may just abide by the organizational rules

as part of remaining employed. However, their individual beliefs may be different and can pose a conflict. The theoretical framework of organizational culture theory provides an explanation of how employees behave and conduct their assigned tasks.

Organization Climate Theory

The study of organizational climate has its theoretical foundation in the 1950s (Fleishman, 1953). Organizational climate is often referred to as how the organization affects employees psychologically based on their work environment (Glisson et al., 2006). Brown and Leigh (1996) contributed to this definition by stating that organizational climate theory also addresses the level of commitment and active involvement of employees and contributes to the retention of employees as well (as cited in Cohen-Callow, Hopkins, & Kim, 2009). Based on personal experience in a work environment, an employee will develop a value system about how he or she views his or her employer (James et al., 2008). If the employee perceives that the organization's climate is a positive place, he or she is more likely to remain with his or her employer (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Mallon & Hess, 2014).

Organizational Culture Theory

Williams and Glisson (2014) found that organizational culture affects the climate of the organization. Organizational culture theory explains the expectations of the organization about the way their employees behave and conduct their job (Glisson et al., 2006). The origins of this theory began in the 1970s. In the 1980s, an interest in organizational culture theory developed, leading to less focus on organizational climate theory in research (Schneider et al., 2013). The reason for this new phenomenon was that

organizational culture research provided a deeper understanding of organizational environment (Schneider et al., 2013). In the 1990s, organizational climate and culture began to merge as one concept because researchers found that the two concepts impacted each other. Organizational culture theory became an important aspect to consider because it influences how child welfare employees will conduct their daily activities and manage their workload (Glisson et al., 2006; Williams & Glisson, 2014). While employees may not personally agree with the values set by their employer, they will conduct their behavior based on the expectations of the organization (Glisson et al., 2006).

Organizational Climate and Culture in Child Welfare

Working in the field of child welfare tends to be a stressful environment (Williams & Glisson, 2014). In a quantitative study, researchers identified components of the organization climate and culture theory as contributing to an improvement in the administrative practices of child welfare organizations. Data from the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW II)—a longitudinal study of children in the United States child welfare system (Dowd et al., 2012)—was used to conduct a multilevel path analysis with the sample of youth, ages 18 months to 18 years, who were in the child welfare system (Williams & Glisson, 2014). In the NSCAW II survey, caseworkers completed an Organizational Social Context survey to address organizational climate and culture. The findings were that these high levels of stress caused by the pressures that child welfare workers are responsible for the well-being of the children in the child welfare system. Additionally, child welfare workers will go

above and beyond what is required of them to make sure that they care for the well-being of their assigned children (Williams & Glisson, 2014). As a result of this pressure, child welfare workers end up working additional hours and expending effort to provide the services needed by the children in order to have a positive outcome. This commitment also causes their work environment to cause emotional stress due to the high demands. Bearing this effect in mind, child welfare administrators need to understand that their climate and culture shapes retention and turnover of their child welfare employees (Agbényiga, 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014). If organizations are willing to work on improving the climate and culture of the work environment, then child welfare workers will be more likely to remain on the job for a longer period (Williams & Glisson, 2014).

Research in Child Welfare

Child welfare is one of the most important human services fields to benefit from research because its outcomes directly affect vulnerable children and their families as well as those who provide the services (Mallon & Hess, 2014). The research has had a focus on the children in the system rather than the child welfare workers. While extensive research and program evaluation exists in the field of child welfare, the research is predominantly quantitative. Quantitative research is beneficial when demonstrating statistical data, significance between groups, and data analysis of instrumentations such as surveys taken from participants (Mallon & Hess, 2014). This type of research method is particularly more common due to the advancement of technology as online surveys become more common for child welfare workers. The convenience of completing a research study online consists of entering the data provided

into data analysis programs that the researchers are using. Quantitative research is also beneficial because the statistical data can be categorized into various groups to identify the issues within the field. Quantitative methodological approach in the field of child welfare has taken a focus on numbers of turnover and retention, factors which contribute to turnover and retention, and measuring data.

While quantitative research is beneficial, more attention needs to be given to the benefits of qualitative research. Qualitative research is particularly useful in the explanation of the quantitative data as well as understanding the issues under study (Mallon & Hess, 2014). In regard to the phenomenon of turnover and retention of child welfare workers, qualitative research can be useful in gaining perceptions from the frontline workers about their experiences. When conducting phenomenological research, researchers will be able to gain insight about the experiences of child welfare workers. In this research study, phenomenological research helps understand what makes child welfare workers remain on the job and thus contributes toward the retention literature.

Child Welfare Worker Turnover

Over the past few decades, the field of child welfare has experienced an increased awareness about the problem of high turnover rates of child welfare workers. As a result of this problem, the U.S. General Accounting Office (2003) conducted a nationwide quantitative research study with a survey design. Their interest was whether child welfare organizations were obtaining exit interviews from their child welfare workers and supervisors, particularly whether those child welfare organizations were willing to allow the U.S. General Accounting Office to view that data (U.S. General Accounting Office,

2003). In addition, a content analysis was useful to determine whether recruitment and retention impacted child safety, permanency, and overall well-being of the child. Child welfare workers who were employed with their current employer for no more than 2 years caused a negative impact on child victims of maltreatment and their families (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). As child welfare workers leave, those that remain behind do not have the time needed to establish relationships with the children and their families. The reassignments of the investigations and the visits with the children are now limited due to the time constraints of the organization's deadlines, which burdens the newly assigned caseworkers.

To understand more about the retention of child welfare workers, it is important to understand what factors cause child welfare workers to leave (Aguiniga et al., 2013). Mor Barak, Nissly, and Levin (2001) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis study in order to discover reasons for child welfare workers to leave their place of employment. The most common predictor of child welfare worker turnover was their expressed intent to end their employment. By discovering the reasons why child welfare workers wanted to leave, administrators would be able to find ways to help foster staff retention within their organizations. Worker turnover researchers suggest two major factors affect the decision for child welfare workers to leave: personal and professional life (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Shier et al., 2012).

Personal Life

Personal factors taken into consideration when examining turnover of child welfare workers include those factors defined as (a) the educational background of the

individual; (b) the amount of time employed with a child welfare organization; (c) gender, age, marital status; (d) being a parent; (e) possession of a license or in the process of obtaining a license through supervision; and (f) commitment to the field of child welfare (Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, & McCarthy, 2008; Weaver, Chang, Clark, & Rhee, 2007). In the exploration of turnover literature, personal factors were an "intention to leave" rather than actual turnover (Weaver et al., 2007). Even though intention to leave is not equivalent to turnover, researchers found it is a strong indicator of contributing to the reasons toward the high turnover of child welfare workers (Aguiniga et al., 2013). While exploring the demographics of the child welfare worker, child welfare researchers have not definitively found whether these variables directly impact child welfare worker retention (Weaver et al., 2007).

Professional Life

While personal life factors have been reasons why child welfare workers leave, researchers discovered that their professional life has a larger contribution toward turnover (Shier et al., 2012). Professional life includes organizational factors such as salary and benefits, caseload size, availability of resources, supervisory support, training, level of peer support, organizational climate and culture, opportunities for promotion within the child welfare organization, amount of workload burden placed by child welfare administrators, and job satisfaction (Shier et al., 2012; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2008; Weaver et al., 2007). All these factors have been contributions toward worker dissatisfaction and a higher intention to leave (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Shier et al., 2012).

The more dissatisfied a child welfare worker is with his or her workplace, the more likely the worker will leave his or her employer (Shier et al., 2012).

Child Welfare Worker Retention

While an older body of research exists on the high turnover rates of child welfare workers, a gap exists in current published literature addressing child welfare worker retention. In child welfare literature, the concepts of turnover and retention of child welfare workers have been listed as opposites become recommendations that administrators should address as causing turnover in order to make them stay yet the two concepts actually coincide with each other (Zeitlin, Augsberger, Auerbach, & McGowen, 2014). While turnover and retention literature go hand in hand, specific themes contribute toward child welfare worker retention and needs noting.

In child welfare literature, some common themes contribute toward retention of child welfare workers. Chenot et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study to see if supervisory support and organizational culture impact the turnover of child welfare workers. Using a cross-sectional survey design on a sample of public child welfare employees, with supervisors and support staff being excluded, Chenot et al. (2009) responded to various questions on their intent to stay. One of the challenges found was that social workers who worked in the field of child welfare obtained more education, such as graduate studies, and then they might not remain on the job. If child welfare workers remain with their employer for 3 years, then they are more likely to remain on the job long-term.

In addition, strong supervisory support affects the intent to stay among child welfare workers (Chenot et al., 2009). Chen, Park, and Park (2012) found that if child welfare workers felt that their supervisor supported them in the development of their career, then they were better able to handle the complex stresses of their work environment and stay. Augsberger, Schudrich, McGowan, and Auerbach (2012) found that if child welfare workers felt supported by their administration, then they were more likely to remain on the job. This finding would be important for child welfare administrators to examine ways to improve staff retention.

Burns (2011) conducted a qualitative research study by using grounded theory to examine intention to leave with the career preference of child welfare workers. Semi-structured interviews provided the data source of the child welfare workers. A connection between intention to leave and the perception of the career of child welfare were important findings. For the child welfare workers who left, a pre-conceived notion was that the job was only a stepping stone to gain experience in order to obtain the preferred job. On the other hand, if child welfare workers were committed to working with child victims of maltreatment and their families prior to commencing their job, then they were more likely to remain in their current employment.

Caseload Size

When a child welfare worker begins employment, they must receive training and a chance to get adjusted and acclimated to the new position before receiving a new caseload (Schwartz, 2011). As they begin working in the field, one of the situations that may occur is finding themselves in an increased caseload due to one of their colleagues

deciding to leave their job without any warning. As the caseload increases, child welfare workers begin to leave because a high caseload is not manageable and a contributing factor to high turnover rates (Mallon & Hess, 2014; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). Yamatani, Engel, and Spjeldnes (2009) conducted a mixed methods study to discover what a manageable caseload size for a child welfare worker should be. Focus groups provided their responses to the research qualitative component of the study. The participants reviewed a maltreatment case, in which they were to describe how they would go about the investigation. For the quantitative portion of the mixed methods research, two quantitative methods involved: (a) job shadowing of child welfare worker's daily activities and (b) an analysis of time needed to complete an investigation for over 16,000 cases during the course of 3 years. According to their findings, the average caseload should not exceed 16 cases. However, the average caseload was nearly twice that size (Yamatani, Engel, & Spjeldnes, 2009). While caseload size has been quantifiable for what is considered manageable, child welfare workers will struggle to provide quality casework when their caseload size is too high (Mallon & Hess, 2014). As a result of the recommended caseload size, researchers suggested that child welfare administrators need to find alternatives to keep the caseload size down, as well as the paperwork manageable in order to reduce the stress of their employees (McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009).

Educational Background and Training

In order to retain the current workforce of child welfare workers, administrators need to hire child welfare workers who have the educational background to prepare them

for working in the field (Mallon & Hess, 2014). One of the most effective programs preparing child welfare workers for the field is the child welfare certification, offered through some of the social work programs (Barbee et al., 2009; Zlotnik, 2002). This certification has a focus on the core values of social work and coincides with the experience of doing practicum placements in the field of child welfare (Barbee et al., 2009; Zlotnik, 2002). Additionally, the federal government provides Title IV-E funding, as a form of financial assistance, to social work students interested in working in the field of child welfare (Barbee et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014). Researchers have taken an interest in seeing whether child welfare certification is beneficial for retention of child welfare workers. Barbee et al. (2009) conducted a program evaluation on child welfare workers who obtained a specific child welfare certification from their social work program to see if that certification contributed toward their retention. The findings were that child welfare workers who had the certification surpassed their coworkers who did not have the certification. Equally important, they were better equipped to handle the job responsibilities, more efficient, and demonstrated confidence in their abilities. Folaron and Hostetter (2007) added to this research and found that if social work students take child welfare courses and obtained a child welfare practice and policy certification, they would be more adequately prepared with the skills needed to work in the field. Also, child welfare workers who obtained the certification were better able to handle the more complex cases and use their problem-solving skills more effectively than those who did not receive this certification.

The retention rate of workers with this certification is higher than those who do not have it (Barbee et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014). Job performance was also higher for those who obtained the certification. As child welfare administrators hire social workers with a specialization in child welfare, the more likely their staff remain with their employer on a long-term basis.

Recruitment, Screening, and Selection

In child welfare retention literature, an interest has been at the organizational level with child welfare administrators taking more precautions in the hiring process. Mallon and Hess (2014) suggested to child welfare administrators that they provide the potential child welfare workers a realistic description of what the nature of the job entails and their requirements and expectations. Having this information prior to accepting a position in child welfare could help contribute toward retention.

While this practice is generally not new for employers, within the field of child welfare, providing a detailed job description is still relatively new (Faller et al., 2009). Providing a job description and expectations of the job can be helpful in various ways, including videos, presentations, tours of the facility, and even brochures (Mallon & Hess, 2014). According to Faller et al. (2009), more child welfare organizations are using this screening and selection process as a way to provide potential child welfare workers a full understanding of what the job entails. However, not enough research in this area exists to see if this screening and selection process affects the long-term retention of child welfare workers. However, it is suggested that this process can be effective.

This process allows child welfare administrators to draw out the most qualified applicants for the child welfare organization, as well as being able to screen out those not equipped or qualified to handle the job (Ellett, Ellett, Ellis, & Lerner, 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014). By following this process, child welfare administrators would be more likely to hire child welfare workers who demonstrate their ability to handle the job and possess the qualifications needed in order to successfully remain with the employer (Ellett et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014).

Supervisory Support

Supervisory support plays an important role in the retention of child welfare workers (Chenot et al., 2009; Lizano, Hsiao, Barak, & Casper, 2014; Mallon & Hess, 2014; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2008; Weaver et al., 2007). When supervision is effective for child welfare workers, especially the newly hired employees, child welfare workers will experience job satisfaction and a commitment to their employer (Kim & Mor Barak, 2015; Mallon & Hess, 2014). In addition, child welfare workers would experience a sense of accomplishment, as well as competence in their field (Mallon & Hess, 2014; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009).

Supervisory support also depends on the skills of their supervisors (Mallon & Hess, 2014). Dickinson and Painter (2011) found that child welfare workers were 44% more likely to stay on the job after two years if their supervisors had retention knowledge and skills (as cited in Mallon & Hess, 2014). A supportive and effective supervisory experience by way of supervision through assigned tasks, emotional and social support, and assisting child welfare workers through the stresses of the job can provide child

welfare workers with a sense of protection from the demands of the job as well as improvement in their overall well-being (Lizano et al., 2014; Mor Barak et al., 2009).

Peer Support

While conflicting research appears on peer support and its influence on child welfare retention, other researchers (e.g., Chenot et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014) report its role as a contributing factor to retention. In some child welfare organizations, a formal peer support or mentoring program is available to child welfare workers in order to provide additional tools to be successful in their career (Backer & Kern, 2010; Mallon & Hess, 2014). Backer and Kern (2010) conducted a program evaluation of a peer network used in a California organization that works with youth and their community. Peer support or mentoring programs could be beneficial for child welfare workers, because they have an opportunity to problem-solve their cases (Backer & Kern, 2010; Mallon & Hess, 2014). Additionally, child welfare workers involved with a mentor would be able to learn from other coworkers who had more field experience than they do. In this way, they learn how to manage their workload (Mallon & Hess, 2014). This experience could assist in the retention of child welfare workers who have just begun working for the organization (Chenot et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014).

Summary

Within the field of child welfare, two major areas exist in the knowledge base with respect to their staff: the high turnover of child welfare workers and their retention. This chapter was an overview of what researchers found in regard to the problem of the high turnover of child welfare workers, as well as factors which contribute to their

retention. The presentation and discussion of these two areas were within a conceptual framework of organizational climate and culture theories. While literature regarding turnover has already provided an initiation of discussion and awareness of the problems that child welfare workers face, retention literature still has not been fully discussed by researchers. In addition, retention literature has taken on a predominantly quantitative research method. However, little qualitative research exists in this literature review.

A major theme found among the literature was the intention to leave as expressed by the child welfare worker. The exploration of many variables included: personal to professional life, as well as caseload size, educational background and training, recruitment, screening, and selection, supervisory and peer support. This qualitative research study will extend knowledge in the field of child welfare by using a phenomenological approach in order to learn about the lived experiences of child welfare workers, from both urban and rural communities, who remained with their current employer for a minimum of 3 years.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research method and design. This study took a phenomenological approach with snowball sampling method. A pretest of the eight interview questions was completed. Two focus groups of six participants, one from a rural community and one from an urban community occurred.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. I used a phenomenological approach to gain a description of child welfare workers' experiences because they are the ones actively working in the field of child welfare. The result was themes that show what is keeping child welfare workers employed with their present employer.

In this chapter, I will discuss the phenomenological study and the rationale in choosing this methodology. Next, I will describe my role as the researcher in this study. Then I will explain the participant selection logic for the sample and use of purposeful snowball sampling. Focus group interviews were useful to illustrate details of the nature of the interviews. A detailed description on both methodology and the data collection process follow. Issues of trustworthiness, as well as credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and a thorough explanation of ethical procedures through the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) make up the rest of the section before I conclude with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question postulated in this study was "What are the experiences of child welfare workers that influence them to stay with their employer for 3 years or more?" For this qualitative research study, a phenomenological approach was useful in

understanding the experiences of child welfare workers remaining with their same employer for a period.

Phenomenological researchers focus on having participants describe their experiences and how they perceived them (Patton, 2002). By learning about the experienced phenomena, it helps to provide an explanation about how people view the world around them and developed their worldview. In other words, the experiences that the individuals have encountered are brought to a level of consciousness to understand a common experience (Van Manen, 1990).

The use of focus groups was the methodology, enabling me to hear firsthand participants' experiences and how their experiences can help improve the environment where they are currently employed (see Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011). Two focus group interviews were held. One group consisted of three participants from an urban community, and the other group had five participants from a rural community.

Role of the Researcher

In a phenomenological study, the primary role of a researcher is to capture the essence of the experience of the participants, in this case child welfare workers (Sanjari et al., 2014). I was previously a child welfare worker for just over a year. During that time of employment, I did not hold any supervisory, instructor relationships, or have any power over any of the potential participants. Due to having previous experience in the field of child welfare, researcher bias may be present. To minimize this bias, my former colleagues were not part of the sample. In order to address my possible researcher bias, I used member checking to ensure that I understood the participants' experiences

accurately during the focus groups (see Maxwell, 2013). In respondent validation, or member checking, study participants provide their feedback about the collected data (Cope, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Journaling was also a tool used during the data collection and analysis process in order to identify any of my researcher bias (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

While the initial plan was to have a total of 12 participants, with six participants in each group, there were unforeseen circumstances. The sample consisted of eight Michigan child welfare workers. Three of these participants were employed in an urban Michigan community and the other five participants were employed in a rural Michigan community. These eight participants were current employees with a public child welfare organization. Each of these participants had a minimum of 3 years of experience with their current employer. The recommended sample size, in focus group interviews, is between six and 10 participants (Patton, 2002).

Purposeful snowball sampling was the procedure for selection. Purposeful snowball sampling can be a helpful way to identify more participants. For example, Macpherson et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to discover the perceptions about the enforcement and awareness of the child safety laws with regard to (a) bicycle helmets, (b) child booster seat legislation, and (c) graduated drivers licensing injury prevention and practice among the provinces and territories of Canada. Macpherson et al. used snowball sampling by sending a survey through electronic correspondence to

government officials who worked with these three issues as well as law enforcement and legislatures (2015). In the electronic correspondence, the 80 participants were the conduit to forward the survey to those whom they thought had the expertise to participate in the study, if they did not meet the criteria themselves. As a result, the researchers were able to identify five to 11 experts in each province who met the criteria for their study. For this current study, snowball sampling allowed participants to identify other child welfare workers meeting the same criteria (see Given, 2008). The identification of the first participant was by talking with a public child welfare worker, who was a former colleague, to establish whether they were aware of anyone who would meet the criteria of the study. This former colleague then asked other workers who met the criteria if they would be interested in participating in the study.

One of the challenges to a snowball sampling method was that the participants would only recommend child welfare workers that they personally knew. Other child welfare workers who may have met the criteria were not available or informed about this study (see Given, 2008). To prevent this, I selected child welfare workers with a range of years of experience, starting from 3 years and more in order to add their lived experiences. After I spoke with the first participant, he identified who he felt met the criteria of working for the public organization for a minimum of 3 years and if they would be interested in participating in the study. I then asked the next individual if she was interested in being involved in the study and she agreed. Then I asked her if she could recommend someone who they knew would meet the criteria. This method

continued until I had eight participants for the urban focus group and seven participants for the rural focus group.

Instrumentation

I used focus group interviews as the instrumentation method. Within the field of child welfare, focus groups have been commonplace, in order to obtain more in-depth information. Nesmith (2015) conducted a mixed methods study in regard to the problem of regular or inconsistent parental visitation between parents and the children in foster care placement. Focus groups were the qualitative portion of the study, and consisted of caseworkers, non-relative foster parents, and relative caregivers. The reason for adding the focus groups into the study was to help provide deeper insight to the quantitative findings.

For this study, I conducted two focus groups, in an urban and rural area, with a total of eight participants: three for the urban group and five for the rural group. In phenomenological research, interviews are more informal and allow for more engaged dialogue with the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended questions are commonplace in phenomenological studies and allow for a more detailed response. I prepared these questions (see Appendix A) in advance prior to commencing the focus groups.

Instrument Development

There was a set of nine questions asked of the participants during the interview (see Appendix A). From the child welfare retention literature, reviewed in Chapter 2, there were five themes that were discovered: (a) caseload size, (b) educational

background and training, (c) recruitment, screening, and selection, (d) supervisory support, and (e) peer support. In literature, these five themes were found to contribute toward the retention of child welfare workers. As a result, the questions were formulated to address each of these themes.

I conducted a pretest of the questions by asking three child welfare workers, who were not included in the study, to review the questions. These child welfare workers also met the criteria of being with the same employer for at least 3 years. They were asked to provide any feedback on the clarity of the questions. Additionally, I was able to see if they were able to give me the information I intended to gather based on the questions I asked them.

Focus Group

I began the interviews with rapport building exercises in order to create a comfortable ambience where the participants could feel safe to be open about their lived experiences (Krueger, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). The rapport building exercises were through casual conversation and an ice-breaker. Following the ice-breaker, I asked the group to reflect about their experiences as a child welfare worker to set the tone for the interview (Moustakas, 1994). After they were given a few minutes to reflect on their experiences as a child welfare worker, I began the interview.

Data Collection

During the data collection process, I was the only individual facilitating the focus group interviews. For the location of the urban focus group, after obtaining permission from a local university's Social Work Department, their setting was the interview site

because of its neutrality for the participating child welfare workers, allowing for a more open dialogue. The rural focus group location changed to their county's Intermediate School District Conference Center, after obtaining permission from the Walden University IRB for a change of location, based off of the request of the participants to move the location closer as the travel time would be 40 to 50 minutes for the participants. During the focus groups, with permission of each focus group member, I recorded the interviews taking notes simultaneously with a Smartpen device. Each of these focus groups did not exceed more than two hours in length.

The participants received the transcripts of their responses through electronic correspondence as an attachment. In this way, each member checked their responses to ensure that I had accurately and richly described their experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). They had a week to respond to their electronic correspondence with any revisions that needed to be made. Since the participants addressed all of the questions needed for this study in the focus group sessions, a follow-up plan was not scheduled.

Data Analysis Plan

After completion of the two focus groups, I organized the transcribed data through a phenomenal analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The process began by grouping all of the responses to each question. Horizonalizing, which is defined as taking each statement to have equal value, was the first step, as I assigned meanings to each. I then grouped these meanings into overarching themes, in order to provide rich descriptions of the experiences of the child welfare workers. Finally, I conducted a content analysis, by

using QSR NVivo software, to discover major and minor themes (QSR International, 2012).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility involves addressing in detail not only the issue under study, but also any issues not easily explained (Gay et al., 2006). To increase credibility of the data, triangulation was useful by conducting respondent validation (Cope, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Observations made during the focus groups, journaling, as well as the transcribed data, were the data I used in the triangulation process (Cope, 2014; Patton, 2002).

Credibility is also achieved by providing a detailed description of the lived experiences of the child welfare workers (Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The way I received a detailed description was by asking the sample to give a full explanation in their responses, during which I took detailed notes. In addition, taking the extra time to establish rapport with the child welfare workers helped ensure that rich detailed descriptions were forthcoming during the focus group (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

Transferability

Transferability occurs when the results of the study are applicable to others conducting similar studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The way to know that transferability happens is through the readers being able to come to their own conclusion based on the results of this research study (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). With the detailed description of the lived experiences of the child welfare workers, those who read

this research study can also find ways it could be applied to their own experiences (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). For future research, the findings of this study will benefit other researchers who take a qualitative approach to the discussion of how to retain child welfare workers and see if they find similar themes in their studies.

Dependability

Dependability occurs when a researcher demonstrates consistency with the collected data over the course of time (Polit & Beck, 2012). The way of establishing dependability is through the methods selected for data collection. Data collection was through an audit trail of thorough note-taking during the focus groups (Cope, 2014; Gay et al., 2006). This was done to ensure that there is accuracy in the data that is collected (Koch, 2006).

During the note-taking process I recorded any observations made during the focus groups about the group interactions, facial expressions, tones of voice used by the participants, body language, and the overall observations of the focus group (Gay et al., 2006; Maxwell, 2013). In addition, I kept a journal about perceptions and thoughts that occurred during the data collection process (Gay et al., 2006). Finally, the respondents' validation further ensured the dependability of the data (Cope, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002).

Confirmability

The definition of confirmability involves discussing the various methods used in the data collection process in detail (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I accomplished this end by providing an exhaustive description of the essence of the lived experiences of the

child welfare workers (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Polit & Beck, 2012). When reporting the themes in the study, detailed direct quotes from the participants helped establish confirmability (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Procedures

Prior to finding participants who were involved in this study, the steps taken and permission was granted from the Walden University IRB Approval No. 04-21-17-0340047. All the participants were over the age of 18. Participation in this study was voluntary, and I did not coerce, bribe, or promise any type of compensation for their involvement. Professionalism did continue throughout the interview process by the moderation of the group, and allowed participants to express their opinions. In addition, I informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time or not answer any questions with which they may be uncomfortable. Participants reviewed an informed consent form and those who agree to participate in this study provided their signature. The consent form included the following information: a description of the study, information about the researcher, as well as contact information, procedures, an explanation that participation is voluntary and that they could resign at any time, risks and benefits to being involved in the study, and detailed information about confidentiality (Walden University, 2015).

The participants learned about the scope of the study, as well as the dissemination plan for the findings prior to commencing the focus group. They learned that child welfare administrators will be able to use the findings to (a) implement policies and (b) provide an environment where child welfare workers will remain employed long-term

(Sanjari et al., 2014). The study participants were also informed that confidentiality will be respected. Their actual names and their work locations would not be disclosed, only whether they work in a urban or rural community (Sanjari et al., 2014).

Prior to the focus groups occurring, the participants involved in the focus group reviewed and discussed the interviewing protocol (Sanjari et al., 2014). The participants were also informed about the data analysis process and the respondent validation procedures (Maxwell, 2013; Sanjari et al., 2014). Finally, the study participants learned that I would safely secure the forms with the original signatures for five years locked in a home safe, which would only be accessible to me.

Summary

This chapter discussed the phenomenological research study. In the methodology, a sample size of 12 Michigan child welfare workers was discussed and that two focus groups were utilized for this study. Steps for collection and data analysis were described. Chapter 4 will focus on the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. My goal was to gain a description of their shared experiences actively working in child welfare. The research question postulated in this study was "What are the experiences of child welfare workers that influence them to stay with their employer for 3 years or more?"

In this chapter, I will discuss the pretest of the interview questions and its results by child welfare workers who have remained with their employer for at least 3 years. Next, I will describe the setting and demographics of the participants and their focus groups. Then I will explain the data collection process and provide an analysis of the data. Following this, I will discuss the evidence of trustworthiness as well as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. And finally, the results of the two focus groups will conclude these sections with a summary of the answers to the research question.

Pretest of Interview Questions

In the pretest, I asked three child welfare workers to review the interview questions. These three child welfare workers were not included in the study, but they did meet the criteria of being with the same employer for a minimum of 3 years. They were given the interview questions and asked to provide any feedback on the clarity and reliability of the questions. I also asked if they felt they would be able to give me the

information I needed based on the questions asked. When I presented the interview questions to each of the child welfare workers, they all stated that the questions were clearly written, easy to understand, and they were able to answer the questions.

Setting

To my knowledge, and based on the responses of the participants in both focus groups, there were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced them or their experiences at the time of this study that could have influenced interpretation of the study's results. The urban focus group took place at a local university's Social Work Department. In the Social Work Department, there was an enclosed student lounge. To gain access into the lounge, there were two points of entrance with wooden doors. Before commencing the focus group, there was a sign place on each door that there was a focus group in session and to not disturb. For the focus group, there were two couches that were facing each other with a wooden coffee table in the middle. The rural focus group took place at the rural county's Intermediate School District Conference Center. In the Conference Center, a room was designated and labeled for the focus group. The room was arranged with four tables placed into a square so that all the participants could face each other.

Demographics

There was a total of eight participants, three from the urban focus group and five from the rural focus group, who participated in the focus groups. In the urban group, there were two women and one man who participated. Participant 1 is a 40-year-old Caucasian woman who has been employed for 12 years with experiences in foster care

and child protective services. Participant 2 is a 40-year-old African American female who has been employed for 5 years with experience in child protective services. Participant 3 is a 45-year-old Caucasian male who has been employed a little over 8 years with experiences in foster care and child protective services.

In the rural group, there were five women who participated. Participant 1 is a 47-year-old Hispanic female who has been employed for 9-and-a-half years with experiences in child protective services, foster care, and foster care home licensing. Participant 2 is a 35-year-old Caucasian female who has been employed for 10 years with experiences in foster home licensing, child welfare funding, peer coach, and guardianships. Participant 3 is a 34-year-old Caucasian female who has been employed for 4 years with experience in child protective services. Participant 4 is a 38-year-old Caucasian female who has been employed for 12 years with experience in foster care and foster care licensing. Participant 5 is a 50-year-old Caucasian female who has been employed for 13 years with experience in child protective services and foster care.

At the time this study was conducted, each participant in this study was still currently employed with a public child welfare organization for at least 3 years. The actual time employed with the same employer ranged from 4 to 13 years. These experiences of the participants included children's protective services (CPS), foster care, foster care home licensing, child welfare funding, guardianships, and peer coach for family meetings between the families and the child welfare workers.

I facilitated two focus group interviews, one with a group of child welfare workers employed in an urban community and one in a rural community. The urban

community is comprised of multiple cities, all within a 15 to 30 minute commute from each other. Each city offers multiple options of primary and secondary public and private schools for their residents. Within each of the cities, there are various options of social services available to those who are in need. Common allegations of maltreatment of child abuse and/or neglect, according to the urban focus group participants, were of physical neglect. Examples of physical neglect allegations were a) dirty homes; b) homes without the basic utilities of gas, electric, and/or water/sewer; c) insufficient amount of food for their household; and d) bugs, such as cockroaches and bed bugs.

The rural community is comprised of cities, but they are vaster in distance as they are predominantly in an agricultural setting. There are more secluded and remote communities that are separated by country roads and the commute into their city could take up to 45 minutes. Each city provides their residents with only a few primary schools and one main secondary school, both in the public and private sector. There are limited social service organizations available for their residents to use. However, the residents would have to travel longer distances in order to access these resources. One of the major complaints that the rural focus groups expressed was that they spend more time driving to each home than they do in completing their daily assigned tasks. Common allegations of maltreatment of child abuse and/or neglect, according to the rural focus group participants, were related to substance use/abuse. Examples of substance use/abuse allegations were a) marijuana use in the home with children present, b) homes that were used as methamphetamine labs, and c) improper supervision of children while under the influence.

Data Collection

For the urban focus group, there were eight who were invited and initially agreed to participate. On the day that the focus group was scheduled, one of the participants received a CPS investigation that required immediate intervention. The second participant ended up not being able to attend. And three were unable to attend and did not provide an explanation for not coming. As a result, there were three participants that were present for the urban focus group.

The location of the urban focus group was held at the local university's Social Work Department. The focus group was scheduled for up to 2 hours, which was the duration. Prior to commencing the interview, the participants were informed participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time or not answer any questions with which they may be uncomfortable. They were also told that confidentiality will be respected and that their actual names and their work locations will not be disclosed, only whether they work in a rural or urban community (see Sanjari et al., 2014). They were provided the informed consent form, and they reviewed it and provided their signature. The interviewing protocol was reviewed with the participants (see Sanjari et al., 2014). They were also informed about the data analysis process and the respondent validation procedures (see Maxwell, 2013; see Sanjari et al., 2014). The participants were told that I hope to share my findings with child welfare administrators so they could implement policies and provide an environment that encourages long-term retention (see Sanjari et al., 2014). They were informed that I would safely secure the forms with the original signatures for 5 years locked in a home safe that would only be

accessible to me. After permission was granted from the participants, I used the Smartpen device to record and take notes simultaneously.

In the rural focus group, there were seven participants who were invited and agreed to participate. On the day that the focus group was scheduled, two of the participants stated that they were unable to attend. As a result, there were five participants that were present for the rural focus group. Originally, it was planned that the rural focus group would take place in the same location. However, during the process of identifying participants for the rural group, they requested a location closer to where they lived as they would have to commute 40 to 50 minutes to get to the local university. As a result, a Request of Change form was submitted to the Walden University IRB for a change of location to the rural county's Intermediate School District Conference Center. After approval was granted, the rural focus group was held and the duration was also for 2 hours. Prior to commencing the focus group, permission was granted to use the Smartpen device for recording and taking notes.

Prior to beginning the interview, the same process that I shared with the urban group was shared with the rural group. The participants were informed participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time or not answer any questions with which they may be uncomfortable. They were also told that confidentiality would be respected and that their actual names and their work locations would not be disclosed, only whether they work in a rural or urban community (see Sanjari et al., 2014). They were provided the informed consent form, and they reviewed it and provided their signature. The interviewing protocol was reviewed with the

participants (see Sanjari et al., 2014). They were also informed about the data analysis process and the respondent validation procedures (see Maxwell, 2013; see Sanjari et al., 2014). The participants were told that I hope to share my findings with child welfare administrators, so they could implement policies and provide an environment that encourages long-term retention (see Sanjari et al., 2014). And finally, the participants were informed that I would safely secure the forms with the original signatures for five years locked in a home safe, which would only be accessible to me.

While the initial plan was to have a total of 12 participants, with six participants in each group, there were unforeseen circumstances. As a result, in total there were eight participants who were involved in this study. In qualitative research, the primary focus is on data saturation rather than depending on the numbers of participants (Hancock, Amankwaa, Revell, & Mueller, 2016). Data saturation in focus groups is achieved when there is a redundancy in the data collected and there is no new information that could be gleaned from the group (Hancock et al., 2016; Walker, 2012). After careful review of the transcripts from both focus groups, it was determined that data saturation was reached and there was no new information that could be received.

Once the focus groups were completed the participants received the transcript of their responses through a document sent by e-mail. They were each given a week to respond to their electronic correspondence with any revisions that need to be made. The feedback was received from both groups that I had accurately documented their experiences and that there was nothing additional that needed to be added. After their

feedback was received, the data analysis process began, which is discussed in the next section.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data from both focus groups, the responses given by the participants were grouped with each interview question asked by using QSR NVivo software. QSR NVivo is content analysis software for qualitative research (QSR International, 2012). It assists the researcher to code themes, frequent words, and terminologies used. This process was done for all nine questions for each group. Next, I went through each of the participants' responses sentence by sentence and noted any words or phrases that were repeated by the child welfare workers. Words or themes of "good supervisory support" and "strong support with coworkers" were dominant with each focus group as they discussed the reason for their retention. Similar themes were present in advice to new workers about how to be successful in the field such as "learn about what the seasoned workers do," "learn what the other workers (i.e., CPS, foster care, foster care licensing) do in their jobs," and "ask your supervisor to prioritize your day." These were the most common as all participants consistently stated that training did not prepare them for their job. One of the strongest issues with both focus groups was that it was critical for new child welfare workers was to use self-care strategies to be successful. The most prevalent theme was to "not take work home" followed by other phrases such as "leave the building for breaks," "hang out with other coworkers so you can vent," "go out to eat with coworkers," and "be aware of your body cues and listen to them." These words and phrases were grouped into themes in order to analyze the data.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

As previously mentioned in Chapter 3, credibility involves addressing in detail the issue under study, but also any issues not easily explained (Gay et al., 2006). To increase credibility of the data, triangulation was used by conducting respondent validation (Cope, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In the triangulation process, I used observations made during each focus group, journaling, as well as the transcribed data (see Cope, 2014; see Patton, 2002).

In the beginning of each focus group, extra time was given in order to establish rapport with the child welfare workers to help ensure that rich detailed descriptions were provided during the focus group (see Cope, 2014; see Moustakas, 1994). I also noted detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of the child welfare workers, and I read my notes out loud to the participants during the focus group so they could provide feedback (see Maxwell, 2013; see Moustakas, 1994). The way the description was given was by asking the participants to give a full explanation in their responses while I took detailed notes during the focus groups.

Transferability

Transferability occurs when the results of the study can be applied to others conducting similar studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Transferability happens when the readers are able to come to their own conclusion based on the results of this research study (Cope, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). By providing detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of these child welfare workers, those who read this research study can also

find ways where it could be applicable to their own experiences (see Cope, 2014; see Moustakas, 1994). As a result, there were no adjustments made to the transferability strategies presented in Chapter 3.

Dependability

Dependability occurs when a researcher is consistent with the collected data (Polit & Beck, 2012). Dependability was established through the methods selected for data collection. Data collection was accomplished through an audit trail of thorough note-taking during each focus group (see Cope, 2014; see Gay et al., 2006). An audit trail was completed in order to ensure accuracy in the data collection process (see Koch, 2006).

During the note-taking process I recorded my observations during the focus groups about the group interactions, facial expressions, tones of voice used by the participants, body language, and the overall observations of the focus group (see Gay et al., 2006; see Maxwell, 2013). I also kept a journal about my perceptions and thoughts that occurred during the data collection process (see Gay et al., 2006). Finally, I used respondent validation to ensure the dependability of the data (see Cope, 2014; see Maxwell, 2013; see Moustakas, 1994; see Patton, 2002). As a result, there were no adjustments made to consistency strategies as mentioned in Chapter 3.

Confirmability

Confirmability involves a detailed discussion of various methods used in the data collection process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I have provided an exhaustive description of the essence of the lived experiences of the child welfare workers (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994; Polit & Beck, 2012). When reporting the themes in the study, I

used direct quotes from the participants so that confirmability was established (Cope, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). As a result, there were no adjustments made to the strategies as mentioned in Chapter 3.

Results

The research question postulated in this study was "What are the experiences of child welfare workers that influence them to stay with their employer for 3 years or more?" There were two focus groups that took place: one with child welfare workers employed in an urban community and one in a rural community. They were each asked a set of nine questions to address the research question for this study (see Appendix A). In this section, I will address their responses to each of the questions.

Urban Focus Group

Interview Question 1 What are your experiences on the job that has caused you to stay with your current employer this long? The responses of the participants yielded four major themes to this interview question. For this group, the most significant theme was that the job provided "stability". They all expressed that they were assured that their job was secure and they appreciated the financial compensation, as well as "great health insurance" provided by their job. The second theme from the participants was that they expressed having "close relationships" with their colleagues. Participants 1 and 3 stated that when they started their job, they had a large group of people who began at the same time. For them, they formed a "close bond" with each other as their support system. The third theme to what caused them to stay for so long was that they had positive supervision. Words such as "lucky to have good supervisors" and "had good

supervisors" were used. All three participants expressed that their best supervisors provided them with encouragement and supported them as employees. Words such as "they valued you" and "cared about you" were commonly stated. And the final theme, by all three participants, was that they made self-care a priority in order to be successful. All three participants stated the key phrases of "I did not take work home" and "My work cell stayed at work and I never took it home with me".

Interview Question 2 For your coworkers who left the job, why do you think they are no longer here? The responses from the participants yielded two major themes to this interview question. For the first theme, all three participants stated that the workers were unprepared for the realities of the job. Statements like "they did not know what they were doing" and "they felt useless" due to the job being "overwhelming". All three of the participants expressed that they felt the new workers did not "know how to do their job".

The second response was that they were also not provided with the supervisory support needed in order to be successful. Participant 1 provided the example of a time when a child welfare worker was affronted with a traumatic situation (such as a deceased baby or a "bad removal") management focused more on completing the paperwork necessary and did not provide an opportunity for the workers to decompress after the experience. They stated that this experience is common within their office, but expressed that facing secondary trauma is very difficult. Participant 2 stated "seeing the actual abuse and/or neglect up front is hard". Since their management team does not provide

the support needed, that is one of the reasons why Participant 2 stated she felt that her coworkers left.

Interview Question 3 If you were to give advice to new workers about managing their caseload, what would it be? What is your current caseload size, and do you feel that it is currently manageable? In response to the first part of the question, there were three responses. The first piece of advice was to be in communication with your supervisor. Statements such as "find out what's important to your supervisor" and "ask your boss to prioritize" were expressed. Second, all three of the participants stressed not to take work home. Participant 3 stated, and the others agreed by nodding their heads, that "when you are at work do work and not socialize". Further clarification was given that it is important to complete tasks while you are at work and not appear to be socializing with your coworkers. This distraction will slow down the ability to complete all of the paperwork that the job requires. With the final part of the question, all of the three participants expressed firmly that their current workload was not manageable. They stated that with the "demands from everyone" from the court, community partners, and management, they felt that it was difficult to maintain their workload.

Interview Question 4 When you were hired into your current position, what kind of orientation did you receive? All of the three participants stated that they received the same type of orientation. They all stated that their training consisted of six weeks of training outside of the office to learn about the job as well as how to learn the documentation component of the computer system utilized. The three participants stated that they spent six weeks away from the office, and one week was at the local office.

They all stated that during that time period, they would have to travel back and forth and they all stated that they felt that it was "not useful". The participants all stated that they felt that they learned the most in training when they were shadowing other coworkers in the field.

Interview Question 5 Do you feel adequately prepared for your job? Why or why not? When this question was asked, the participants stated a unanimous "no". Participant 2 expressed that the training that was received did not help prepare them for the field. Participant 1 stated that new workers were "on their own" once they completed the training. This was further explained by stating that it was rare for supervisors to come with the newly trained worker out in the field. Participant 1 added that it was rare for new workers to be "allowed to shadow seasoned workers" and, as a result, new workers "didn't know what they were doing". As an example, she stated that she went out in the field with a new worker and she was "shocked" with the lack of interviewing skills that the new worker used when interviewing the children. She stated that the new worker used leading questions, such as "did your mom hit you?" and did not implement the training that they just received on how to question children. Participant 1 followed up by saying that if their supervisor went out with the new workers for a while upon return from training or even a seasoned worker who was their designated mentor, they would be better prepared for the demands of the job.

Interview Question 6 What is your most memorable experience with your supervisor, positive or negative? What are qualities that you admire in your current or past supervisors? If you had negative experiences, what qualities do you wish your

supervisor would have? When asking this question, the responses provided were twofold: positive qualities and experiences and negative qualities and experiences. The first positive quality that Participant 3 experienced by a good supervisor was that she demonstrated compassion and "basic human kindness". Another quality was that a good supervisor listened and would give direction as needed. Participant 2 stated that she admired when her supervisor was proactive. She stated that her supervisor would leave their office and personally "seek them out" if they needed to discuss something. Participant 3 stated that he appreciated when his supervisor would "validate him" when he would "do a good job". With regard to experiences, Participant 2 stated that she appreciated that her supervisor would use rapport building techniques. She stated that her supervisor would provide incentives for their team and give "rewards when they would do a good job". Additionally, she stated that she felt "good" when her supervisor would "give encouraging words even in a bad situation". She stated that this would help her to feel "encouraged".

In regard to the negative qualities and experiences, Participant 3 stated that a bad supervisor would "make you feel unappreciated". One of the ways this happened was that, Participant 2 stated that her supervisor would only come and talk with them when the supervisor felt that the worker was "wrong" and needed to be scolded. Participant 2 added that when they had a bad supervisor, they were "never acknowledged when you did a good job". She stated that even when you are in a difficult situation and trying to get through it, her supervisor would say "you still have to do A, B, C and so on" and would not demonstrate empathy. Additionally, Participant 1 stated that her supervisor

said that “I don’t care” about the situation they were experiencing, but rather “get your work done by the deadlines”. Participant 2 added that one of her negative experiences from a bad supervisor was that she was “hands off”. She clarified that her boss would always be unavailable and that she would never leave her office. The participant expressed that this made getting the job done more difficult.

Interview Question 7 What are your thoughts of a Peer Mentor Program? Do you think it would be beneficial? Why or why not? When this question was asked, all of the participants stated a unanimous “yes”. The challenge, according to all of the participants, would be that it would need to be implemented correctly. Participant 2 stated that they attempted assigning mentors, but their caseload was still as high. She clarified that, in order to make the program work, the mentor would have to be maintaining a lower caseload due to the time that would be needed to invest in assisting the new workers. Participant 1 expressed that a Peer Mentor Program is needed for new workers in order to learn how to “navigate the system”. She clarified that it is challenging for new workers to understand the processes of the court and what the expectations are. With guidance from the seasoned workers, it would help inform the new workers on expectations and how to be successful.

Participant 2 also added that seasoned workers could assist the new workers in various interviewing techniques that would be valuable for the new worker. She stated that, even as a seasoned worker, when she would go out in the field with another worker she would find a different technique or “style” that was used that she could implement when she conducted her own interviews. Participant 2 clarified that the new workers, by

having a mentor, could take the different interviewing styles and tailor it to their "own style that works for them".

Interview Question 8 What recommendations would you give that would help child welfare workers stay? In response to this question, five themes emerged. The first theme was that it was important to get along with your coworkers. A common phrase of "make friends with your coworkers" emerged. It was stressed by all three of the participants that having your coworkers as friends provided a support system. The second theme was about the importance of teamwork. All three of the participants expressed that even when supervisors are not providing support as they should, the coworkers will. Words like "they will be there to lean on" and "having good support with coworkers" were mentioned. Participant 2 stated "it's gonna be one or the other…more than likely you won't have both good management and good coworkers, but when they both fail, that's when you're gone". The third theme was about finding a balance. Participant 2 stressed that new workers need to learn how to "find ways to make it through the day" and how to "prioritize their day". She stated she learned "what do I let go under my skin and what am I going to do to get to the end of the day". The final theme was in regard to having a passion for child welfare. Words like "have a love for the job" and "you have to like what you do" were stated by Participants 1 and 2 as part of being able to be successful in the field and will help new workers remain in the field. By being passionate about the work that they do, all three of the participants shared that they found that they were able to handle the high levels of stress since they were positively impacting of the children and their families.

The fifth theme was self-care. Participant 3 stated that, when he started, he was spoken to about self-care. He additionally stated that he was given a handout about self-care and his supervisor encouraged him to take breaks. As a result, he implemented self-care techniques since he started working in the field. For Participants 1 and 2, they stated that no one had ever spoken with them about self-care.

Since Participants 1 and 2 were not told about self-care, they were asked if they had any suggestions on any self-care techniques that they found to be effective. Two themes were found: one was personal care and the other was regarding more effective work management. Participant 3 stated that he found it beneficial to physically leave the building during his break. He stated that while he was out of the office, during his break, he would make a conscious effort to not think about work. Participant 3 suggested going out to lunch with coworkers in order to "unwind". As the job is "very stressful", it was added that it is good to have each other as an outlet since they are all going through similar experiences. Finally, Participant 1 stated that it is important to be "in tune with your body" to be able to recognize how the stress impacts how a worker behaves both at work and at home.

When it came to efficacy with work, Participant 1 started by saying that it is important to "learn what is priority". She suggested that new workers should go to their supervisors and ask them to prioritize their day. Participant 3 added that it is also helpful so "seek out seasoned workers". Participant 1 added that it is helpful to find workers who are "willing to help". Additionally, Participant 2 stated that it was important to be

able to “vent with the coworkers” and also to get feedback from other coworkers about how to handle different situations at work.

Rural Focus Group

The participants in the rural focus group were asked the same questions as the urban focus group.

Interview Question 1 What are your experiences on the job that has caused you to stay with your current employer this long? The responses of the participants in the rural focus group yielded four major themes to this interview question. For this group, the most significant theme was the importance of having a strong relationship with their coworkers. Phrases such as “feel like family”, “staff get along” and “strong bond” were used to describe the strong relationship they had with each other. The second theme found was they the participants expressed that they had good supervisory support. All of the five participants used words to describe their supervisors as “honest” and “trustworthy”. Participant 2 expressed how she appreciated when her supervisor would “keep you updated on oncoming news and policies being implemented instead of telling you last minute”. Participant 4 appreciated that her supervisor would engage staff in “peer building activities”, because they “created a bond” among each other. The third theme identified factors about staff personalities. Participant 3 stated that she felt “she could be herself” and she was able to excel at the job. Participant 3 that she was able to “be comfortable” with herself and felt “accepted”. The final theme was about the passion for child welfare. Participant 1 stated that she was “doing the job due to the passion in the field”. All five of the participants expressed that they “enjoy” the work they do.

Interview Question 2 For your coworkers who left the job, why do you think they are no longer here? The responses from the participants resulted in two emerging themes: due to their personal issues and challenges with management. Participant 3 stated that she felt that new workers experience a "burn out". Participant 4 stated that new workers are unable to navigate the system as easily as those who are seasoned. She explained that learning how the court operates and the expectations can be "overwhelming". Another issue was not being able to handle the secondary trauma. Participant 4 stated that it is difficult to "deal with" all of the cases that are being investigated and it can be internalized. Participant 1 stated that when there was a traumatic event in their office, the administrators did not provide them with the support needed to handle the situation. As a result, there were people who left as they "could not handle" the job.

The second theme addressed issues the participants had with poor supervisory support. Participant 3 stated that there are supervisors who "didn't know how to do their job" due to not having the experience in that particular area of child welfare. Participant 5 stated that there are supervisors who are "unprofessional". She stated that there are those who will talk about their employees "behind their backs". Participant 4 stated that there are supervisors support their staff. She referred to a time when their office experienced a traumatic event. Participant 4 stated that instead of providing support for staff, while going through the crisis, there were supervisors who "pressured" them to meet their deadlines and did not "give us a chance to cope with what happened".

Interview Question 3 If you were to give advice to new workers about managing their caseload, what would it be? What is your current caseload size, and do you feel that it is currently manageable? When asked the first question, there were five themes that were given. The first theme addressed documentation. The five participants felt it was important to stress that new workers must "document everything". Participant 2 clarified that there are supervisors who will "throw you under the bus" if they were to be disciplined by upper management.

The second theme was self-care. Each of the five participants stressed that the new workers should "not take work after hours". Each of the five participants heavily stressed the word "not". Participant 3 stated that "work needs to stay at work".

The third theme was professionalism. Participant 3 stated "don't get involved with chatting and socializing". Participant 2 commented that supervisors will allow for the work environment to be "relaxed", but that it is "encouraged" to be working at their desk completing the required paperwork and data entry. Participant 3 also added that when "you are at work, then you need to work and not get caught up with the chatting".

The fourth theme present was to learn the job. Participants 1 and 2 stated that there are various roles within child welfare and it is important to understand what each coworker does. Phrases like "CPS needs to know what Foster Care does" and "workers need to understand what Foster Care Licensing does" were used. Participant 1 clarified that new workers do not usually have the time to learn what other departments within child welfare, but they all work together. As a result, new workers need to learn the expectations of the other workers in order to be effective within their own role.

Finally, the last theme present was to learn from others. Participant 4 stated that new workers should "tag along with seasoned workers". Participant 1 supported her and said, "follow other workers". It was expressed that by attaching yourself to seasoned workers, the new workers would be able to learn how to do their job more successfully.

With regard to the second part of the interview question, the participants expressed how their current workload was not manageable due to the changes of the software system. Participant 3, who works in CPS, stated that they maintain an average of 12 cases. She stated that 12 cases are not manageable if the worker substantiates evidence of abuse and/or neglect in their investigation. For the participants who worked in Foster Care, Participants 2 and 5, they stated that they average approximately 15 cases. They stated that due to the new software, they have to upload all of the documents themselves. Participant 4 stated that this whole process may take "hours" to accomplish. For Participants 1 and 4, who work in Foster Care Licensing, they both stated firmly that the new computer software has greatly diminished their capacity to maintain their caseloads of 30 plus. All of the five participants expressed that if their office was able to hire more support staff, they could better maintain their current loads.

Interview Question 4 When you were hired into your current position, what kind of orientation did you receive? Four of the five participants stated that they did not go to training immediately. The range of time between being hired and attending training was between one to three months. In the interim, Participant 4 stated that she did "case aid" work. She stated that she drove clients around to various appointments. Additionally, she would transport the foster children. Participant 5 stated that she conducted "parenting

time" where she would supervise the parental visit. Participant 4 stated that she "shadowed other workers". Participant 3 also stated that she did data entry for other coworkers. For Participant 2, who immediately went to training, she stated that she would follow other coworkers within the various departments during the periods that she was assigned to be in the local office.

Interview Question 5 Do you feel adequately prepared for your job? Why or why not? All of the participants unanimously stated that they felt they were not adequately prepared for the job. Participant 2 stated that "you can't be prepared for the job". Participant 5 discussed how training is too lengthy and "too much time is spent away from family". She also stated that when workers return from training, it is expected that they maintain a full caseload. Participant 4 stated that there should be a reduced caseload for newer employees. All of the five participants agreed that it is not possible to "handle a full load" directly after training.

Interview Question 6 What is your most memorable experience with your supervisor, positive or negative? What are qualities that you admire in your current or past supervisors? If you had negative experiences, what qualities do you wish your supervisor would have? When asking this question, the responses provided were twofold: positive qualities and experiences and negative qualities and experiences. The first positive quality mentioned was efficiency. Participant 5 stated that her boss is like "crazy efficient" and "knows policy". Participant 4 stated that she appreciated that her supervisor had worked in their area, and she had an understanding of the "issues they faced". Another quality mentioned was having a supervisor who was proactive.

Participant 5 stated that her supervisor was “hands on”. Participant 4 stated her supervisor took the time to get to know each worker in their team and knew how to encourage each one. A final quality discussed was support. Participant 1 stated that her supervisor had an “open door policy” where she could walk in anytime just to talk. Participant 3 stated that her supervisor encouraged self-care. And Participant 2 stated that her supervisor had an incentive program that was tailored to each person on their team, which helped their team be successful.

In regard to the negative qualities and experiences, the first issue to come up was inconsistency among supervisors. Participant 3 stated that each supervisor would give her a different answer on the same question. Some supervisors, according to Participant 5, would even tell workers to go against what policy clearly stated. Participant 4 expressed frustration, because she stated that there are some supervisors who did not like assigned workers “consulting with other supervisors”.

Another issue that was addressed was the lack of professionalism among the negative supervisors. Participant 4 stated that her supervisor was “always unavailable to their staff”. Participant 2 stated that she had a supervisor who was “extremely disorganized”. She explained that her supervisor would not follow through with required paperwork and would constantly lose paperwork as well. Participant 2 stated that her supervisor lacked time management skills. As a result, she was not timely in submission of her reports since her supervisor would not read them and approve them on time. And finally, Participants 1, 4, and 5 shared how they have had supervisors who were not supportive of their staff. More specifically, Participants 1, 3, and 4 shared that these

supervisors would “throw you under the bus” if they were facing disciplinary action for their inability to fulfill their supervisory role.

A third, and final, issue identified a lack of experience or knowledge. Participant 3 stated that she had a supervisor assigned to the department that had no field experience. Participant 4 stated that her supervisor “never did my job” and she did not feel like she could rely on her supervisor to answer questions she had. Participant 1 said that she found she had to go to different supervisors to ask specific field-related questions as there were some supervisors who did not even have enough experience working in the field prior to their promotion.

Interview Question 7 What are your thoughts of a Peer Mentor Program? Do you think it would be beneficial? Why or why not? When asked this question, all of the participants unanimously stated that they felt a Peer Mentor Program would be beneficial. Participant 4 stated that the assigned mentor(s) would need to have a reduced caseload in order to have the time to properly assist the new workers. Participant 2 added that new workers should also be assigned mentors from other departments as well, while not having a caseload. The reason was, she stated, was to become cross trained within the other departments and be equipped with the knowledge of how to work together more efficiently. Participant 1 also added that having a mentor would benefit new workers in developing their own method of how to do their jobs. Some examples were: developing different interviewing techniques, knowing which questions to ask and time management skills.

Interview Question 8 What recommendations would you give that would help child welfare workers stay? There were four themes that emerged when the participants were asked this question. The first one is that workers ended up leaving due to not having the support needed to be successful. As a result, all of the participants stressed the importance of seeking out the seasoned workers. Participant 3 stated that it is important to "talk with other coworkers". She said that the workers end up relying on each other to get through the "tougher times". Participant 2 stated that new workers should not be apprehensive of asking questions of the more experienced workers in the department.

Another theme which re-emerged was about maintaining firm boundaries. Participant 4 stated that new workers need to "use their voice" and Participant 5 stated that they should "express your needs to your boss". The concern that these participants had was that they all stated that they felt the new workers just did everything that was told of them, no matter how unrealistic the expectations were, and it lead to turnover. They all stated that had firmer boundaries been set up, by the new workers, and they were not afraid to talk with their supervisors about them then they might end up remaining.

A third theme found was performance management. Participant 3 stated that new workers need to find an effective way to handle their time management. She stated that this could be done by "shopping around to figure out your style". This would include talking with more experienced workers and asking them how they manage their day. In addition, Participant 5 stated, by seeking out seasoned workers the new staff are able to develop relationships with them. This will provide the support system that the new workers will need to be successful.

The fourth theme found was self-care. Participant 3 stressed the importance of self-care. She stated that the way that she learned about self-care was when she experienced "burnout" and had to develop and implement self-care techniques. A follow-up question was asked of all five participants if anyone had discussed with them about implementing self-care techniques, of all participants revealed that no one ever talked with them about the topic of self-care. Since none of the participants were informed about self-care, they were asked what techniques they used. The first response was that they have developed strong boundaries. All of the five participants firmly agreed and used phrases such as "I never take my work phone home", "I don't take work home", "I will use my adjusted time if I work over", and "I will take time off of work when I'm stressed". Participant 5 mentioned how her supervisor supports self-care and will encourage her to take time off.

The second response given was that they cope through food. They all five laughed, and stated that they indulge in food and snacks. Participant 1 stated that they each have different types of snacks, salty and sweet, and they share with each other regularly when they are in the office. Additionally, they stated that they "go out to eat after work". Participants 2 and 5 stated that their socializing is surrounded with food and they find opportunities to "hang out" with each other.

Comparison of Focus Group Responses

In this study, the responses from the participants from the urban and rural focus groups yielded the similar findings. All the participants believed that their caseload size was not manageable. They all felt that their educational background and training did not

prepare them for their job. All the participants viewed a video that outlined their job responsibilities and expectations, yet they felt that they were not prepared for their position. With regards to positive supervisory experiences, they all appreciated supervisors who were proactive, demonstrated compassion, and possessed leadership skills. For their negative experiences, they all disliked when their supervisor was unsupportive of their staff. In the urban group, the participants added that they did not appreciate supervisors who were unavailable. The participants in the rural group expressed that they did not like having supervisors who lacked experience in the area of supervision. They additionally stated how they disliked supervisors who lacked professionalism, were inconsistent, and lacked field experience. All the participants were in favor of a peer mentoring program. And finally, they all stressed the importance of implementing self-care techniques.

Summary

In summary, there were two focus groups that were asked a set of nine interview questions in order to address the research question: What are the experiences of child welfare workers that influence them to stay with their employer for 3 years or more*?* The questions were formed based on the themes that were identified from the literature developed in Chapter 2: a) caseload size; b) educational background and training; c) recruitment, screening, and selection; d) supervisory support; and e) peer support. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretation of these findings. Next, I will describe recommendations for future research. I will then address the implications of this study and how this will apply to positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with the same employer for 3 years or more. Child welfare workers, from urban and rural communities, were purposefully selected through snowball sampling. Each of these workers had at least 3 years of experience and worked in various areas of child welfare. The goal was to document their experiences, using a phenomenological approach, of working in the field of child welfare. I used two focus groups, one of workers from urban areas and the other from and rural areas, in order for the participants to engage in an open dialogue (Moustakas, 1994). To allow for more detailed responses, open-ended questions were used. The interview questions were developed based on the five themes discussed in Chapter 2. In addition to the five themes discussed, a new theme of self-care emerged that was further explored in this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study extend the child welfare retention literature from a qualitative perspective. After thorough examination of the findings, it was noted that the responses of all eight participants supported the previously mentioned themes in the literature: a) caseload size; b) educational background and training; c) recruitment, screening, and selection; d) supervisory support; and e) peer support. What new findings emerged, and would benefit from future research, is the topic of self-care. All eight

participants expressed that self-care was a critical component that has contributed to their retention in their jobs.

Caseload Size

For both groups, urban and rural, they all reported that their current caseload size was not manageable. With all the requirements expected of them, they stated that their caseloads were too high. In addition, it was also brought up by the eight participants that a new software system was implemented and it has made them less efficient in their daily tasks. The participants shared that they are under a lot of pressure from their organization, and with higher caseloads, they all felt the burden to stay on top of their work and not fall behind. These findings support the retention research which found that child welfare workers are at higher levels of stress in regard to their caseload size and unmanageable paperwork (McGowan et al., 2009; Van Hook & Rothenberg, 2009). In the rural group, all five of the participants talked about the fact that their administrators did not realize how much time and distance they spent in commuting and shared how the travel time made getting their tasks done in 40 hours in a week challenging.

Educational Background and Training

All eight participants stated that to be employed as a child welfare worker, they needed to have a bachelor's or master's degree. The participants unanimously stated that their educational background in addition to the training that they received from their employer did not adequately prepare them for the job. In the literature review, child welfare administrators need to hire child welfare workers who have the educational background to prepare them for working in the field (Mallon & Hess, 2014). However,

the findings of this study suggest that while educational background and training are beneficial, it may not be a factor that contributes toward staff retention. In the urban group, the participants expressed frustration at the fact that they did not receive any supervisory support when they went out in the field independently. Participant 1 shared that she was "shocked" at how unprepared the new workers were. She felt that if supervisors went out in the field with the newly trained staff, it would help the new workers build confidence in their skills and they would receive more hands-on training. In the urban group, Participant 5 stated that new workers would receive a full caseload upon return from training. Participant 4 suggested that administrators should implement a lower caseload for newly trained staff during their probationary status so that they could gain more experience in their daily tasks.

Recruitment, Screening, and Selection

All eight participants stated that during their interviewing process, they were told to view a video which has a child welfare worker explaining the nature of the job. Researchers had suggested that child welfare administrators provide the potential child welfare workers a realistic description and full understanding of what the nature of the job entails and their requirements and expectations (Faller et al., 2009; Mallon & Hess, 2014). They all mentioned how that workers presented the worst-case scenario of what their position might entail. While the participants stated that they viewed this video, and it was beneficial to understand about the job responsibilities, they all felt that they still were not adequately prepared for the job.

Supervisory Support

Participants stated that they have had both positive and negative experiences with different supervisors. All eight participants stated that they appreciated when their supervisor was more proactive with their staff. In the urban group, Participant 2 stated that she appreciated when her supervisor would come out of the office to speak with staff. Participant 1 talked about how she appreciated when her supervisor would offer to provide assistance and give direction as needed. In the rural group, Participant 5 stated that she liked that her supervisor was "hands-on." Another theme that was presented is that the participants appreciated when their supervisor demonstrated compassion. In the urban group, Participant 3 said that he appreciated that his supervisor would listen and show compassion. Participants 2 and 3 stated they appreciated when a supervisor would be encouraging to them. All three of the participants appreciated when their supervisor would establish good rapport with them. In the rural group, Participant 4 liked how her supervisor would take the time to get to know everyone and offer encouragement for her staff. Participant 1 shared that her supervisor had an "open door policy" where she could walk in anytime just to talk. A third theme that presented itself was that a positive supervisor had an expertise in the area that they were supervising. In the rural group, Participants 4 and 5 talked about how they appreciate when they have a supervisor who would have the knowledge to answer their questions due to their experience in the field. This is especially beneficial, according to Participants 4 and 5, when you need to consult with them about a difficult case. And finally, a positive supervisor demonstrates leadership skills. Participant 2 from the urban group and Participant 2 from the rural

group liked that their supervisors implemented an incentive program. They both stated that this helped to encourage motivation among their staff. These responses support the literature that having a supportive and effective supervisory experience by way of supervision through assigned tasks, emotional and social support, and assisting child welfare workers through the stresses of the job can provide child welfare workers with a positive support as well as improvement in their overall well-being (Lizano et al., 2014; Mor Barak et al., 2009).

Both groups of participants shared their negative experiences with their supervisors. One of the negative experiences was that they were not supportive of their staff. Participant 3 from the urban group shared that one of the negative experiences he encountered with a supervisor is that the supervisor made him "feel unappreciated." Participant 2 added that she had a negative experience with a supervisor where employees were not "acknowledged when [they] did a good job." For instance, her supervisor would not demonstrate empathy with a difficult case and still required that the casework be done in a timely manner. Participant 1 added that her supervisor told her "I don't care" and that she needed to "get your work done by the deadlines." In the rural group, all five participants stated that they had supervisors who did not support them. Participants 1, 3, and 4 shared that they had a supervisor who would escape responsibility for their actions to avoid disciplinary action and rather blame the staff instead.

A second negative experience shared from the urban group was that a supervisor was unavailable to them. Participant 2 stated that she had a supervisor who was "hands off." She explained that her boss was always unavailable and that she would never leave

her office. Participant 4 from the rural group stated that her boss would be unavailable to provide assistance as needed. This provided the work challenging for these participants to accomplish their assigned tasks. A third negative quality was the lack of professionalism from their supervisors. One of the negative traits that frustrated the participants was that supervisors were inconsistent. Participant 3 from the rural group stated that she would get different answers every time. Participant 5 from the rural group shared how her supervisor would even advise her to go against policy. Participant 4 added how she had a supervisor who would not allow her to ask other supervisors questions. And finally, another negative quality was having a supervisor who lacked the experience or knowledge in their area. For example, Participants 1 and 3 from the rural group had a supervisor who never had any field experience prior to their promotion. Participant 4 stated her supervisor never had experience in her area, and so she felt she could not go to her with any questions. Overall, it was observed that the participants wanted to feel validated and appreciated for the work that they do. In addition, they all wanted to feel that their supervisor supported them in their work.

Peer Support

All the participants in this study felt that it was a good idea to have a peer mentor program. Both groups felt that if the child welfare administrators would implement a peer mentor program, the new hires should have no caseload. This way, the new workers will be able to learn from the seasoned staff without having to worry about trying to juggle their own cases as well. They all felt that it was beneficial for new hires to seek out seasoned workers in order to learn from them. This response supports the literature

that a peer mentor program would provide new workers an opportunity to problem-solve their cases as well as learn from those who have more field experience (Backer & Kern, 2010; Mallon & Hess, 2014). Participant 2 from the urban group and Participant 2 from the rural group shared that seasoned workers could provide different techniques to the new hires in order to improve the way that they manage their day. Not only that, but the new staff should get to know what the other child welfare workers do in the other departments. Participant 2 explained that the new workers need to have an understanding of what others do in the different departments in order to be more efficient with their own assignments.

Self-Care

While the literature review did not discuss self-care, the findings of this study identified that the most significant factor, for all eight participants, that aided in their retention was the implementation of self-care in their personal lives. All the participants stressed that it was critical not to take work home. It was very important, according to the participants, that the best advice that could be shared with a new worker is to establish firm boundaries and stick to them no matter what the cost. Each of the participants provided various techniques of self-care that they used. One of the major themes found was that they would take physical breaks. Participant 3 from the urban group would make it a point to leave the office for a short period of time to recharge. He also stated that he made it a point to encourage his coworkers to go out to eat for lunch so that they could use each other as a sounding board on how to handle their caseloads but to also give an opportunity to vent. The rural group also fondly shared their love for

food. They shared various experiences about going out for lunches and shared with me that they have people in the office who carry specific types of snacks. So, during their breaks, they would eat snacks together. The second theme the eight participants shared was the importance of developing friendships with their coworkers. Participant 3 from the urban group stated that it is beneficial to reach out to seasoned coworkers. Participant 2 added that when you befriend your coworkers, you can vent with them and also get feedback on how to handle specific cases. In the rural group, Participants 2 and 5 stated that whenever they socialize with their coworkers, there is always food and they find opportunities to spend quality time with each other. The final theme, from all the participants, was a personal one and that is that each child welfare worker needs to be aware of their own bodies. In the urban group, Participant 1 stressed the importance of paying close attention to your body cues and how the body reacts. She also stated, along with Participant 5 from the rural group, that it is important to take vacation time. Participant 5 from the rural group stated that her supervisor even encouraged her to take vacations and will even remind her not to be working while on vacation. Recharging and taking care of your body, was a critical factor that contributed to the success of all the participants.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study was organizational climate and cultural theories. Organizational climate theory is defined as viewing how employers provide an environment where employees have a meaningful experience, so that they will be satisfied and remain with them (Fleishman, 1953). Employees develop a value system

about how they view their employer based on their personal experiences in their work environment (James et al., 2008). This theory provides an understanding of how child welfare employees become psychologically shaped by their work environment (Glisson et al., 2006).

The findings of this study illustrated that, to the participants, the most significant factor that aided in their retention was the implementation of self-care in their personal lives. In addition, they all stressed how important it is to get support from their coworkers and form relationships with them. For these eight participants, their climate was created through their social interactions with each other. In addition, the firm boundaries that they set for themselves gave them the ability to continue handling the pressures and demands from their employer while implementing self-care techniques.

Not only is the organization's climate that they provide for their employees important, but their culture is impacted as well (Williams and Glisson, 2014). Organizational culture theory is the expectations of the organization about the way their employees behave and conduct their job (Glisson et al., 2006). This theory influences how child welfare employees conduct their daily activities and manage their workload (Glisson et al., 2006; Williams & Glisson, 2014). Child welfare employees will conduct their behavior based on the expectations of the organization even if they may not personally agree with the organization's values (Glisson et al., 2006). For all the participants in this study, they shared how their organization does not provide support for them when dealing with high levels of stress and secondary trauma. They all shared how their organization's primary focus is making sure that their casework was completed was

completed within the time frames and deadlines. In spite of the lack of support, during highly stressful situations or while experiencing secondary trauma, all of the eight participants stated that they still made sure that the work was completed, and the deadlines met.

The eight participants in this study shared how they have been experiencing high levels of stress from the pressures of the job. They all talked about the demands of meeting deadlines, which their organization requires. In addition, they discussed the pressure of having to work with multiple organizations in order to provide services to their clients. They also identified barriers they encounter with the tools they are given to conduct their daily tasks and that they felt that the tools hindered their ability to be as efficient on the job. Yet, despite all of these pressures and demands of the job, all eight expressed their dedication to the field and a passion for working with child victims of maltreatment and have remained with their employer for 3 years and more.

Limitations of the Study

There were limitations that presented themselves in this phenomenological research study.

1. Snowball sampling could have impacted the transferability of this study since some of their experiences were specific to their local office and the individuals they work with. For future research, it would be beneficial to conduct more focus groups from those in different regions of the state to verify the results.

2. The data collection method of in-person focus groups could have increased participant bias in reporting similar experiences and participants tend to agree with and expand on what other participants shared. While the participants in the focus groups provided a detailed, rich description of their experiences, it is unclear at this time if other data collection methods would allow for additional or varied content.
3. The possibility of personal disclosure may have made participants uncomfortable in discussing their experiences in front of their peers. While the participants were informed about confidentiality, anonymity was a limitation. There were some questions where the participants had to speak in generalities in order to avoid disclosing names of events, clients, and/or staff to observe their local office's confidentiality policy.
4. Some issues identified by the participants were specific to their local office. For these two focus groups, they each experienced a traumatic event where their local office struggled with providing support for their staff. However, it was disclosed that other offices may have provided better support to their staff. There was one issue that appears to be a statewide issue which is the use of the new computer system, to document their work. This change has created a barrier to completing their work in a more timely and efficient manner. Since only two focus groups were conducted, there is not enough supportive data to see if these issues are applicable to the entire state.

The researcher is also an instrument in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Due to previous experience as a child welfare worker who left the job shortly after completion of the probationary status, I am aware that my personal experience will not be that of the participants involved in this study, because they remained with their employer beyond the three-year period. While personal experience in the field could have been a bias, the experiential knowledge was beneficial as I was able to assist the participants in feeling more comfortable in participating in the group discussion. This comfort level allowed for insights, hypotheses, and validity checks to occur (Maxwell, 2013; Strauss, 1987). Respondent validation was useful to ensure that personal experience did not alter my understanding of what was shared during the focus groups.

Recommendations

Based on the results and findings of this study, there are three recommendations for further research. The first recommendation is to further examine the new emerging theme of self-care among child welfare workers to explore the role this may play in retention. In Chapter 2, there were five themes that literature yielded in regard to retention: a) caseload size, b) educational background and training, c) recruitment, screening, and selection, d) supervisory support, and 3) peer support. While the responses from all eight of the participants supported the literature, the issue of self-care was not explored in the literature review. As a result, there is more research that needs to be done to explore self-care among child welfare workers and its link to their professional retention.

Another recommendation is to utilize other qualitative data collection methods, such as case studies, to see if these results can be replicated. While in this study all of the participants were able to express their feelings in an open environment, it is unknown other data collection methods would have yielded additional information or results. And the final recommendation for further research is to replicate this study statewide in order to support these findings. While there were two different locations, urban and rural, it is unknown if all of the organizations in the state would have produced the same findings.

Implications

While there is significant research in the area of turnover of child welfare workers, other researchers have concluded there is limited research that explores what contributes to their retention (Johnco et al., 2014). The findings of this study will contribute to the limited retention literature by supporting the previously identified themes and identifying an emerging theme of self-care. By listening to the experiences of child welfare workers, who have remained with their employer for a minimum of 3 years, this study will provide insight into what makes workers stay in this stressful and difficult job. All of the participants involved in this qualitative study expressed a strong commitment to encouraging each other and providing support through the good times and the traumatic experiences they have. They all demonstrated a passion toward positively impacting the lives of the children and families that they work with. Their lived experiences will be beneficial, to new and ongoing staff as well as administrators, in providing tools needed to be successful in retaining staff in this field.

High turnover rates affect the child victims of maltreatment and their families. When child welfare workers leave, the change in workers can cause families to be without the support needed to reach their permanency goals and unable to establish trust or stable relationship with their assigned worker (U. S. General Accounting Office, 2003; Flower et al., 2005). By retaining staff, the child victims of maltreatment and their families will experience a more stable environment where they can receive the services they need. As a result, they will be able to utilize and implement what they have gained from these services to create a healthy, stable environment for their family. Most importantly, these findings will contribute toward social change by benefiting the children and the families who receive the mandated services from the child welfare organizations. A staff of child welfare professionals with more experience and training remaining with their employers will only improve the desired outcome.

At the organizational level, research has found that retaining child welfare workers provides an annual savings for child welfare administrators of about a third of a million dollars for each state (Barbee & Antle, 2011). With the projected savings, along with fewer burdens to continuously replace staff due to turnover, child welfare administrators can focus more on ways to implement techniques to improve the long-term retention of their staff. Additionally, these findings will also provide insight to child welfare administrators and assist them to develop local policies that provide a positive work environment. This environment will encourage child welfare workers to stay in the field longer, so they will be able to provide services for children and families with the increased skills and knowledge they have gained by remaining with their employer.

At the state government level, these findings will benefit policy makers in the creation and implementation of child welfare policies and regulations for child welfare agencies and organizations. These new policies would include initiatives and programs that center on the self-care of child welfare staff. Child welfare trainings may consider incorporating there could be a specific segment where self-care techniques so that staff will be prepared with the challenges they face and be equipped with the tools needed to be successful. An additional recommendation may include using a trained trauma team to provide support for child welfare staff during traumatic events. This would contribute to the self-care of professionals and illustrate the agency administrators are aware of the stress and value employees. By focusing on the retention of child welfare staff, policy makers may be able to create and implement policies and regulations that will assist to improve the lives of not only their employees, but the lives of the children and their families that need services.

Conclusion

In the field of child welfare, research has discovered that there is a problem with the high turnover rates of child welfare workers and how it impacts the clients as well as the child welfare organizations (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). Within the public and private child welfare agencies, the turnover rate ranges from 23-60% annually (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). While there is a broad range when providing statistics, an annual turnover rate of 25% or higher becomes a problem for child welfare organizations. This poses a problem to child welfare administrators and the retention of their staff. Additionally, this means that clients are unable to receive the mandated

services they need (Aguiniga et al., 2013; Chernesky & Isreal, 2009). As researchers study retention of child welfare workers, it was discovered that if they remain with their employer for 3 years, then they are more likely to stay long-term.

This research study sought to find out what were the lived experiences of child welfare workers who remained with their employer for at least 3 years. The results from the focus groups supported the retention literature. Caseload size, educational background and training, recruitment, screening, and selection, supervisory support, and peer support are all components to assist in the retention of child welfare workers. What was unexpected was that self-care can contribute toward retention. While organizational culture may place a burden and additional pressure for the child welfare workers, one could opine that perhaps it is the climate that contributes toward retention. For all of these participants, even though they have faced both positive and negative experiences which could have led to leaving their organization, their personal choice to implement self-care techniques have resulted in them staying with their current employer with years of service ranging from three to 13 years. More attention should be given to the concept of the implementation of self-care. In the field of child welfare retention research, it would be beneficial to study self-care skills and techniques to determine the role this variable may play in the high turnover rates of child welfare workers. For child welfare administrators, this would mean that they could explore providing support for their staff and encouraging the use of various self-care techniques as a part of a retention strategy. Most importantly, by having child welfare workers who are experts in their field, the

child victims of maltreatment and their families will be positively impacted by having child welfare workers consistently being able to provide mandated services to them.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Ice Breaker Question: What brought you to child welfare?

Interview Questions

1. In 2009, researchers Chenot, Benton, and Kim discovered that if child welfare workers remain with their employer for 3 years, then they are more likely to stay. Each of you here managed to be with your current employer for 3 years. What are your experiences on the job that has caused you to stay with your current employer this long?
2. For your coworkers who left the job, why do you think they are no longer here?
3. If you were to give advice to new workers about managing your caseload, what would it be? What is your current caseload size, and do you feel that it is currently manageable?
4. When you were hired into your current position, what kind of orientation did you receive?
5. Do you feel adequately prepared for your job? Why or why not?
6. What is your most memorable experience with your supervisor, positive or negative?
    a) What are qualities that you admire in your current or past supervisors? If you had negative experiences, what qualities do you wish your supervisor would have?
7. A Peer Mentor Program would be where a new worker would be assigned a seasoned worker, who has been with the organization for at least 3 years, and that

seasoned worker would serve as their mentor. What are your thoughts of a Peer Mentor Program?

a) Do you think it would be beneficial? Why or why not?

8. What recommendations would you give that would help child welfare workers stay?

Closing Statement

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. All of your input and feedback has been truly invaluable. It is my hope that this study will help administrators find ways to keep their employees so that ultimately, the lives of these children and families involved in this system will be improved.